

## Book Reviews

### EXPLORING ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDERS

**Female Sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment and Treatment.** Edited by Theresa A. Gannon and Franca Cortoni. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-470-68343-9, 206 pp. \$42.00 (paper).

**Female Sexual Predators: Understanding Them to Protect Our Children and Youths.** By Karen A. Duncan. Santa Barbara, California: Prager Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-313-36629-1, 241 pp. \$42.00 (cloth).

### SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM: FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDING

Sexual assault in the United States has reached epidemic proportions and can be defined as

any non-consensual sexual act committed on or against another person. Consent refers to a person actively and willingly communicating their sexual desires and boundaries, and the ability to commit to them freely and outside the influence of controlled substances, cognitive, developmental or legal restrictions, fear, threat, intimidation, coercion, persuasion, pressure or force of any kind. Sexual assault could be rape, forcible or not, grabbing, groping, touching or contacting in any manner, physical or non-physical, including exploitation and harassment. Sexual assault is an act focused on the gratification of the aggressor, and/or disempowerment of the survivor where at least one individual experiences a sexual component. Sexual assault survivors are of all ages, races, socio-economic statuses, religions, and genders. Sexual aggressors are often people who are known and/or trusted by the survivor. Sexual assault does not need to have happened recently, or have been reported to the law enforcement or other authorities in order for it to be legitimate. (McLeod, 2011, p. 23)

The two books reviewed in this essay, *Female Sexual Predators: Understanding Them to Protect Our Children and Youths* and *Female Sexual Offenders: Theory Assessment, and Treatment*, are a welcome addition to the clinical literature and appear to be much needed, based on the incidence and prevalence of the phenomenon reported of recent. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) released reports detailing approximately 203,830

sexual victimizations that were reported to law enforcement authorities over the previous year (USDOJ Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). These numbers do not represent the full picture because the majority of sexual assaults go un-reported. Well-cited research from the National Center for Victims of Crime & Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center (1992) indicates approximately 16% of rapes and sexual assaults are reported to police. If these numbers were accurate that would raise the frequency of rape/sexual assault in 2008 to approximately 1,273,937 occurrences nationwide. Further, it's represented in the academic literature that children are the primary victims of sexual assault and that more American citizens are sexually victimized at 14 years old, than at any other age (USDOJ BJS, 2000).

Many myths exist, not only about the frequency and prevalence of sexual assault but about the offenders themselves. The longstanding stereotype of the "dirty old man standing at the edges of the playground in a trench coat, offering candy to little girls" has been empirically outdated. The Centers for Disease Control's Averse Childhood Experiences Study, which has been ongoing since 1995, suggests that a family member, close family friend, or other trusted family acquaintance is responsible for 80% to 90% of sexual assaults perpetrated against children (Centers for Disease Control, 2010).

Well-cited research funded by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect suggests that female child sex offenders perpetrate up to 20% of child sexual assaults in the United States each year (American Humane Association, 1987). Another study found female child sexual offenders as responsible for up to 15% of child sexual assaults (Faller, 1995). Victimization data has identified up to 63% of female victims, and as many as 27% of male victims report having been sexually victimized by a female (Schwartz & Cellini, 1995). In the majority of the modern literature the common theme emerges that female sexual offenders are actively assaulting children in the United States. The rates at which these women are sexually assaulting children could be significantly higher than what many professionals involved in child protection and intervention may believe. This could be based on, or affected by, the sociocultural norms and accepted myths associated with both gender and sexual offending.

The literature suggests 60% to 92% of female child sexual offenders have multiple victims (Faller, 1987, 1995; Finkelhor, 1984). Perhaps the most disturbing trend is that researchers have stated female sexual offenders are less likely to be identified than their male counterparts, with one study indicating approximately 140,000 men are incarcerated for sex offenses in the United States, compared to approximately 1,500 women (Harrison & Beck, 2005). It has been reported that women represent roughly 1% of all adults incarcerated for sexual offenses in the United States (USDOJ, 2007). In addition, female sexual offenders have been suggested to be far less likely to be identified as recidivates, even though the above noted research indicates a proclivity toward multiple victims (Freeman & Sandler, 2008).

In summation, it appears that sexual assault has become epidemic in the United States and that the literature appears to suggest female child sexual offenders are underidentified in our child protective and legal systems, being responsible for up to 20% of child sexual offenses while representing only 1% of individuals charged with and imprisoned for those crimes. A better professional and clinical understanding of female sexual offenders could help in their identification and thus have a positive impact on child protection and child sexual assault survivor, as well as offender, treatment.

## REVIEWING THE TEXTS

### Content and Style

#### FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDERS: THEORY, ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT

Forensic psychologists Gannon and Cortoni's edited volume offers a rich assessment and inclusion of some of the most up-to-date literature concerning female sexual offenders. From the United Kingdom and Canada respectfully, the duo brings an international perspective as well as a diverse sample of contributors to their work. This edited collection of manuscripts is organized by two major themes that identify phenomenon description and treatment and research implications. They appear to have specific goals in mind for each. Gannon and Cortoni explicitly state their understanding of the prominent questions "on the lips of most professionals who work with sexual offenders" (p. 1) are to what extent male and female sexual and non-sexual offenders differ. Their text is well organized, editorial formatting decisions are discussed, contributing authors are easy to read, and the editors take the time to synergize the findings in introductory and conclusion sections of the book.

The first few chapters focus on discussions of the incidence and prevalence associated with female sexual offenders, with the intent of addressing the gendered myths related to sexual offending and the problematic residuals connected to these myths. Prevalence is discussed, and then characteristics of female perpetrators and their perspective target populations are noted. In these sections concepts from the last 20 years of literature are developed more fully along with the development of a better understanding of the phenomenon of female sexual offending and its effects on survivors. The working development of theories such as the "Descriptive Model of the Offence Process for Female Sexual Offenders" are discussed in an incredibly interesting and progressive section on theoretical development authored by Danielle A. Harris, where she notes that while offenses may appear similar, pathways to sexual offending behavior may have significant gendered differences. Mental health issues particular to female sexual offenders are presented. The second section of the book turns to a more clinical focus

by discussing treatment modalities with an emphasis on a gendered comparison, the need for development of female-specific research instrumentation, and possible developments and future considerations for research.

FEMALE SEXUAL PREDATORS: UNDERSTANDING THEM TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN AND YOUTHS

Karen A. Duncan, a licensed social worker and marriage and family therapist from Indiana, has created a book that could be as equally helpful to a sexual assault survivor, family member, or concerned layperson, as to today's informed clinician. Her book appears to have an undercurrent of emphasis on prevention continuing through the chapters as she addresses, with up-to-date empirical citation, dynamics associated with the incidence and prevalence of female sexual offending in multiple environments. Duncan brings a clinical perspective to the subject through vignettes and other examples that carry detail and richness to the concepts she is working to explain.

In the beginning of the book she addresses the issues of incidence and prevalence of female child sexual assault, with information very similar to the Gannon and Cortoni edition, and spends a great deal of time on the explanation of consequences associated with maternal sexual abuse, from the perspective of the victim. The psychological implications for this type of violation are discussed from a perspective that holds special attention and a sense of advocacy for the victim. Duncan speaks to the myths associated with socially imposed gender ideas and how the conceptualization of the mother figure as an icon could possibly be impairing the investigation and disclosure of female sexual offences. Perhaps the most interesting and unique concepts delivered by Duncan come in the core of the text as she discusses research associated with female sexual aggression on college campuses and seeks to identify the gendered stereotypes that have influenced previous research associated with sexual violence in the university setting. Duncan also pays special attention to the topic of sexual assault, harassment, and exploitation in the middle and high school environment, and discusses the implications of student/victims being sexually exploited by coercion and manipulation. In her summation Duncan reiterates a theme of intervention through prevention and the raising of awareness in concern to the multiple arenas in which female sexual offenders target their victims. Duncan includes several instruments (still in the process of validation) related to sexual aggression as appendixes.

### Compare and Contrast

These two texts, while remarkably different, do have one unifying quality in reference to applicability. Both would serve remarkably well at informing a clinician on the topic of female sexual offending. Although both books are very different in their construction, delivery, and covered material, they have

useful and practical application in the clinical setting. Both books share a large thematic section covering incidence, prevalence, and psychological effects of female child sexual assault of the survivors, but their similarities tend to fade afterward.

Gannon and Cortoni have edited a volume that could be as equally helpful in the research and academic settings as it could be with the clinician. Their topics are laid out in a manner that could influence possible new areas of research, and this book could also be well used as a supplemental text in a graduate elective course on sexual deviancy. The theoretical components to the book could be found very helpful in trying to explain and predict female sexual aggression, and their exploration of female offender treatment needs could be examined to help push this area of research forward.

Duncan's book, on the other hand, while retaining usefulness for clinical professionals, could also be of interest to clients of psychotherapeutic interventions who have been affected by female sexual offenses, as well as the larger caring community and other helping professions. As a means of prevention through the raising of awareness, this easily readable book provides a resource not reliant on the full understanding of statistical methods. She does a wonderful job at exploring dynamics seldom seen in the literature, such as the reference to female sexual aggression on college campuses. Furthermore, the vignettes found in her section on child sexual assault at the hands of educational professionals provide an insight that could prove remarkably helpful to those most in need.

### Contributions and Conclusion

The literature base devoted to female sexual offenders has only begun to accumulate over the past few years and still has a great deal of work ahead to be understood at the same level of complexity as its masculine counterpart. Some of the most fundamental differences in male and female sex offenders, as well as the investigation of them and socially imposed gendered perspectives associated with them, are addressed by Duncan, as well as Gannon and Cortoni in their books. Both of these publications could be viewed as remarkably valuable in the context of practitioner education on the subject.

Differing audiences could easily use these works as well. Duncan's *Female Sexual Predators* could find applicability in the larger contexts of helping professions, the concerned community, and as a phenomenological tool for survivors and those concerned about them. Gannon and Cortoni's *Female Sexual Offenders* is a well-edited collection of current research that could be of great use in the academy with value not only for those who are researching the subject, but also as a supplemental graduate student text. In summation, both of the books appear to have valid clinical implications and cross the spectrums of consumer applicability. Perhaps if one had a desire to attain an up-to-date overview of incidence, prevalence, research,

theory, effects of, and intervention in the world of female sexual offending, then best choice could be to read both.

## REFERENCES

- American Humane Association. (1987). *National study on child abuse and neglect reporting*. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. Retrieved January 10, 2011, from <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/research-evaluation/child-abuse-neglect-data/>
- Centers for Disease Control. (2010). *CDC-ACE study: Prevalence of Individual Adverse Childhood Experiences*. Retrieved November 16, 2010, from <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/prevalence.htm#3>
- Faller, K. C. (1987). Women who sexually abuse children. *Violence and Victims, 2*, 263–276.
- Faller, K. C. (1995). A clinical sample of women who have sexually abused children. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 4*, 13–30.
- Finkelhor, D. (1984). *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Freeman, N., & Sandler, J. (2008). Female and male sex offenders: A comparison of recidivism patterns and risk factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 23*, 1394–1413.
- Harrison, P. M., & Beck, A. J. (2005). *Prison and jail inmates at midyear 2004*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- McLeod, D. A. (2011, April). *defining sexual assault for the profession rather than the jurisdiction: Using comparative analysis to work toward inclusion*. Paper Presentation at the National Organization of Forensic Social Workers 2011 Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.
- National Center for Victims of Crime & Crime Victims Research, and Treatment Center. (1992). *Rape in America: A report to the nation*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- Schwartz, B., & Cellini, H. (1995). Female sex offenders. In B. Schwartz & H. Cellini (Eds.), *The sex offender: Corrections, treatment and legal practice* (pp. 5-1–5-22). Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.
- United States Department of Justice. (2007). *Female sex offenders: A project for justice programs, U.S. Department of Justice*. Silver Spring, MD: Center for Sex Offender Management.
- United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2000). *Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement: Victims, incident, and offender characteristics*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics (NCJ Publication No. 182990.)
- United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2009). *National crime victimization survey: Criminal victimization, 2008*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics (NCJ Publication No. 227777.)

*David Axlyn McLeod*  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*